

Brewery seeks local recognition

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By Henry Schulman
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By Reginald Fearman/The Tribune

Tad Stratford and Maureen Lojo learned to brew beer by reading books and experimenting.

EMERYVILLE — Maureen Lojo and Tad Stratford got their commercial refrigerator from the Starry Plough dance hall. Their large steam kettle came off a ship; their small kettle from a soup kitchen.

Such is the makeshift world of "micro breweries," the small enterprises where homemade beer recipes are produced and sold in manageable quantities.

Lojo and Stratford, teenage sweethearts who were later graduated from UC-Berkeley, operate a new micro brewery here in Emeryville called Golden Pacific Brewing Co. They produce a British-style ale packaged in unusual five-gallon boxes that sell for \$20.

These self-taught brewers said their first sale five months ago culminated several years of dreaming and planning, and remodeling the General Motors engine factory they have converted into a brewery.

Micro breweries are not that uncommon in the Eastbay. In fact, Golden Pacific is located close to the better-known Thousand Oaks and Roaring Rock breweries in Berkeley.

What makes Golden Pacific unusual is the unlikely proprietors: Besides being young (Stratford is 26, Lojo 25), they don't consider themselves connoisseurs of fine beer.

"I'm a Lucky Lager kind of guy when it comes to drinking beer," said Stratford, who quit his job as an accounting assistant for UC-Berkeley to devote his full attention to the brewery.

They said they have always wanted to run their own business and just saw a need for a high-quality, locally produced beer.

The couple is also unique because they took no beer-making classes before starting the business. They said they learned everything by reading books, which are still stacked atop large plastic containers that

hold their raw Willamette Valley barley malt.

What Stratford and Lojo lacked in experience, however, they compensated for in patience.

They had talked about starting a brewery for years before they could raise the required capital, said Lojo, who holds a history degree. She quit a job as a computer trainer at Cetus Corp. to get Golden Pacific going.

After finally signing a lease last year, it took them 13 months to sell their first box of beer, she said. They first had to get a liquor license, clean the used equipment they had purchased, install plumbing in the building and concoct a distinctive-tasting beer.

Lojo said they wanted to brew a beer that more resembled the bitter ales sold in England than the weaker lagers, such as Budweiser and Miller, that are popular in the United States.

They spent weeks in the kitchen of their Berkeley home experimenting with different recipes before discovering the blend they wanted to produce.

They had no idea how their first mass-produced batch would

taste until it fermented for about five weeks, Stratford said, but it turned out well.

It was ready in May, when school was just ending at UC-Berkeley. Students throwing end-of-the-year parties saw the tiny ad that Stratford and Lojo placed in the campus paper and bought the beer, which is sold in boxes for convenience.

The beer actually lies in gas-filled plastic containers inserted into the boxes.

"It's a good, strong ale," said Berkeley resident Steve Glaeser, who the beer-makers said is their best customer.

"It's definitely in the top 10 percent of the beers I have had," said Glaeser, who fancies himself a connoisseur of British ales. They've still got some kinks to work out; but the British breweries have been around for hundreds of years. These guys (Golden Pacific) have been there less than a year.

Lojo and Stratford estimate they sell 30 to 40 boxes of beer a week, not quite enough to break even. Stratford said they have invested between \$30,000 to \$40,000 in the venture.

When they are not making the beer, they are delivering the \$20

boxes to addresses in Oakland and Berkeley.

"We would like to get people to come in for tasting," said Stratford.

"But it's hard to get people to come to Emeryville," said Lojo, finishing his sentence.

Although they have developed a blend of ale that customers apparently like, the Golden Pacific beer makers admit they have not been as successful spreading the word.

"Most of our sales come from repeat customers, which tells a lot about our quality but not much for our marketing skills," said Lojo, a Hayward High School graduate.

Stratford, who attended nearby Castro Valley High, said he doesn't want Golden Pacific to grow so much that he and Lojo can't brew all the beer.

For that reason, he said, they don't want phenomenal acclaim, just local success.

"We don't care if someone in Southern California knows who we are," he said, "but we do want everyone in Berkeley to know who we are."

Golden Pacific, at 5515 Doyle St., is open for beer tasting Thursday through Saturday from 4 to 6 p.m.